VOLUME 35 • NUMBER 6
JANUARY 2023 (729) • **$4.95**

Steelers DIGEST

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION
OF THE PITTSBURGH STEEL

32

FRANCO HARRIS

1950-2022

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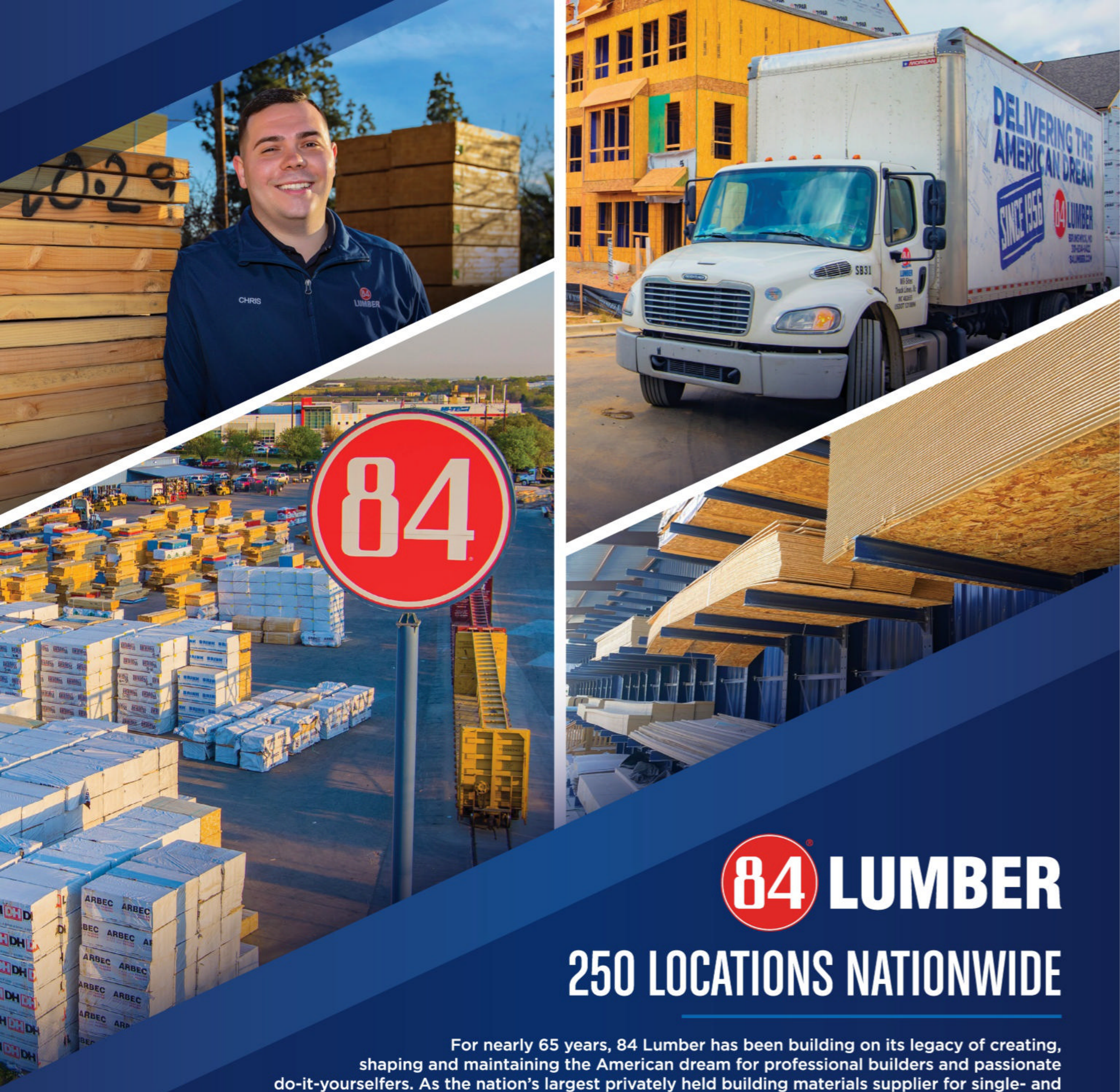

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Digest Photo/KARL ROSER

Hall of Fame RB Franco Harris, 72

He came into the NFL as a first-round draft pick in 1972, and when he finished that season with 1,055 yards rushing, a 5.6 average, and 10 touchdowns despite only starting 10 of the 14 games, he became the fifth rookie in NFL history ever to rush for 1,000 yards. He created what is recognized as the "Greatest Play in NFL History" by running to the football, by simply doing what he was coached to do. He was the MVP of Super Bowl IX, which was the first championship in history for a franchise that had been in business 41 seasons without one. During a decade where his team won 4 Super Bowls and appeared in 17 postseason games to do so, he scored 17 touchdowns. He was elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in his first year of eligibility.

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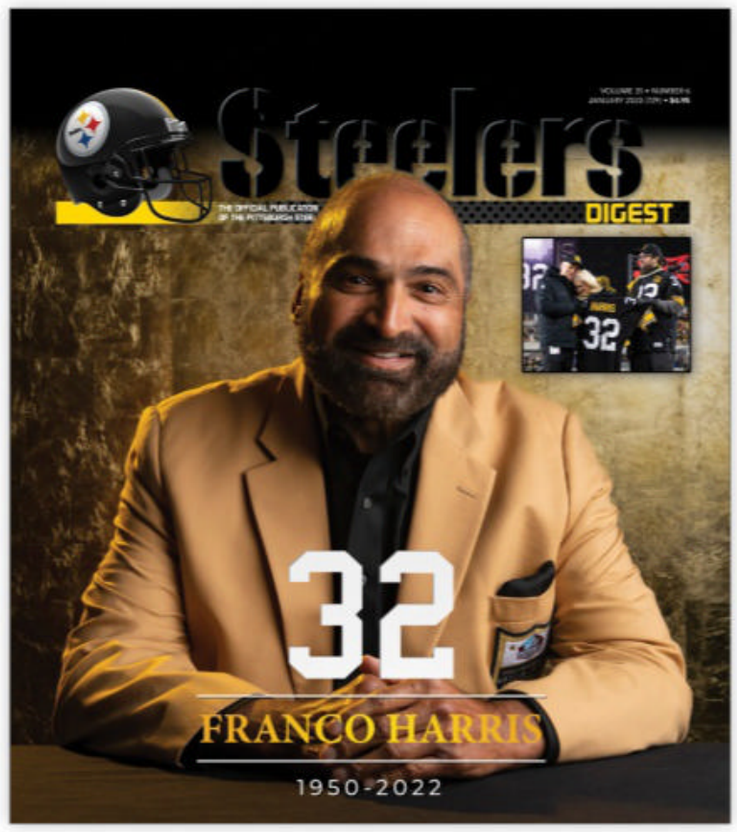
ON THE COVER

The Steelers, the NFL, and the community at large absorbed the loss of a great man when Franco Harris died, just two days before a weekend-long celebration of the Immaculate Reception and his role in it was set to begin in Pittsburgh. "He was the heart and soul of our team," said Joe Greene.

Cover Photo/KARL ROSER



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FROM PAGE 3

"Franco was the heart and soul of our team," said Joe Greene, a man who would know. "When Franco arrived, we became the Pittsburgh Steelers. Franco brought the Steelers out of the dark ages."

Franco Harris was a great football player. There also is ample evidence he was a better human being.

"Anybody who came to him with a charitable interest, Franco always responded favorably," said Joe Gordon, whose title during the 1970s was Public Relations Director but whose role in fact so much more. "The most significant thing was the Pittsburgh Promise. He has been the chairman of the Promise since it started. He gave significant seed money to it at the very beginning, and he has been active all the way through. It's a really special program that provides scholarship money to high school graduates from Pittsburgh Public Schools. Over 2,000 kids have already benefited from it."

More Gordon: "I remember when he was a rookie there was a request from Children's Hospital that there was a young kid who was a big Steelers fan and wanted to meet a player. I went into the dressing room after practice, and I said, 'Anybody here interested in going to Children's Hospital to visit a very sick kid?' There was silence for a while, and Franco came over to me, and this was when he was a rookie, and he said, 'I will go.' That was typical of him. He did so many things of that nature. His contributions to the Pittsburgh community were far greater than what he accomplished on the football field."

Dan Rooney once said, "He's one of the finest, most thoughtful human beings I have ever known."

Digest Photo/HARRY HOMA

On the morning of Dec. 21 came the news that Franco Harris, 72, had died overnight. No cause of death was given.

The 2022 NFL regular season schedule contained two historical celebrations – the 50th Anniversary of the Miami Dolphins' perfect 17-0 season, and the 50th Anniversary of the Immaculate Reception, the aforementioned "Greatest Play in NFL History," the single event that ignited the transformation of the Steelers franchise from moribund to feared within the decade.

The team had planned a weekend packed with events tied to the Immaculate Reception, all of it coming together with the retiring of his No. 32 jersey during halftime of the Steelers-Raiders game to be played at 8:15 p.m. on Saturday, Dec. 24.

"It is difficult to find the appropriate words to describe Franco Harris' impact on the Pittsburgh Steelers, his teammates, the City of Pittsburgh, and Steelers Nation," said Steelers President Art Rooney II. "From his rookie season, which included the Immaculate Reception, through the next 50 years, Franco brought joy to people on and off the field. He never stopped giving back in so many ways. He touched so many, and he was loved by so many. Our thoughts and prayers are with his wife Dana, and his son Dok, and his extended family at this difficult time."

Digest Photo/HARRY HOMA

FOOTBALL FIRST

The son of an African-American father and a Sicilian mother, Harris was born in Fort Dix, N.J., and as a boy he always believed he would follow in his father's footsteps to a career in the military.

SEE PAGE 7 ▷

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FROM PAGE 5

But then the family moved to Mount Holly, N.J., and that's when another door opened for him.

It was at Rancocas Valley Regional High School where Harris began attracting the kind of attention that resulted in a football scholarship to Penn State. With the Nittany Lions, Harris was a complement to halfback Lydell Mitchell even though he finished his own college career with 2,002 yards and 24 touchdowns. But the Steelers were looking beyond the numbers and at the player himself.

"The thing that impressed me about Franco was that coming out of Penn State, he wasn't the No. 1 back, but he showed a willingness to work," said Bill Nunn, who ended up in the Hall of Fame for his ability to identify and evaluate the talent that propelled the Steelers to four championships over 6 seasons in the 1970s. "That first day at practice, he ran everything to the goal line, and he had those quick feet."

Harris had packed a lot of trepidation in the luggage he brought from New Jersey after he got a phone call on Feb. 1, 1972, when the voice on the other end proclaimed, "Congratulations, you've been drafted by the Pittsburgh Steelers." Initially, the trepidation was centered on joining a team that had never won anything. If the Steelers even had a trophy case back then, it was empty.

Then after Harris arrived and got a look at his new team and the talent level of a lot of the players on it, his trepidation morphed into "can I make this team?" Such was the perfect timing of his arrival. And Harris was not alone with that feeling, because the Steelers best player at the time wondered the same thing about the team's newest first-round pick.

"Franco had a habit of running up to the line of scrimmage, stopping, and looking around, looking around, looking around. He kept doing that," said Greene. "I said, 'Oh, well, we got us a dud.'"

The Steelers played six exhibition games that summer, and the third was against the Falcons in Atlanta. Just another exhibition game. It meant nothing. Until it meant everything.

"We played a preseason game in Atlanta, and he did the same thing he would do in practice," said Greene. "He started off one way, stopped, and then he would come back in the opposite direction. And all of a sudden, he took off. He ran 75 yards, and I think I ran on the sideline half of the way with him. I said, 'Oh my goodness. We got one. We got one.'"

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Franco Harris with wife Dana , son Dok, and Steelers President Art Rooney II at the September news conference announcing the Dec. 24 retirement of No. 32.

Digest Photo/KARL ROSER

Digest Photo/ABIGAIL DEAN

Steelers retire Harris' No. 32

BY **DALE LOLLEY**
Steelers.com

The Steelers retired the number of Pro Football Hall of Fame running back Franco Harris in a halftime ceremony during the Christmas Eve game against the Las Vegas Raiders.

The ceremony was part of the planned festivities to commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the Immaculate Reception, the play that immortalized Harris and gave the Steelers the first playoff win in franchise history on Dec. 23, 1972.

Nearly two dozen of his former teammates and other Steelers alumni braved the elements – the gametime temperature was 8 degrees – to honor Harris. Harris' wife, Dana, and son, Dok, also were in attendance.

"It wasn't supposed to be like this. The big man was supposed to be here tonight beside me," said Steelers President Art Rooney II. "I want to thank Dana and Dok for being here with us tonight and sharing Franco with us for 50 years.

"Franco brought us joy for 50 years. In recognition of his many contributions both on and off the field, it's my honor to declare No. 32 officially retired."

Rooney presented a No. 32 jersey to Harris' family while the crowd in attendance chanted, "Franco."

A video tribute to Harris was then played in the stadium, led by the Immaculate Reception, which brought cheers from the crowd.

Chants of "Franco" also broke out at the end of the video honoring his career.

The retirement of Harris' number is the third officially retired by the Steelers. Pro Football Hall of Fame members Ernie Stautner (70) and Joe Greene (75) both have their numbers retired, as well. ✦

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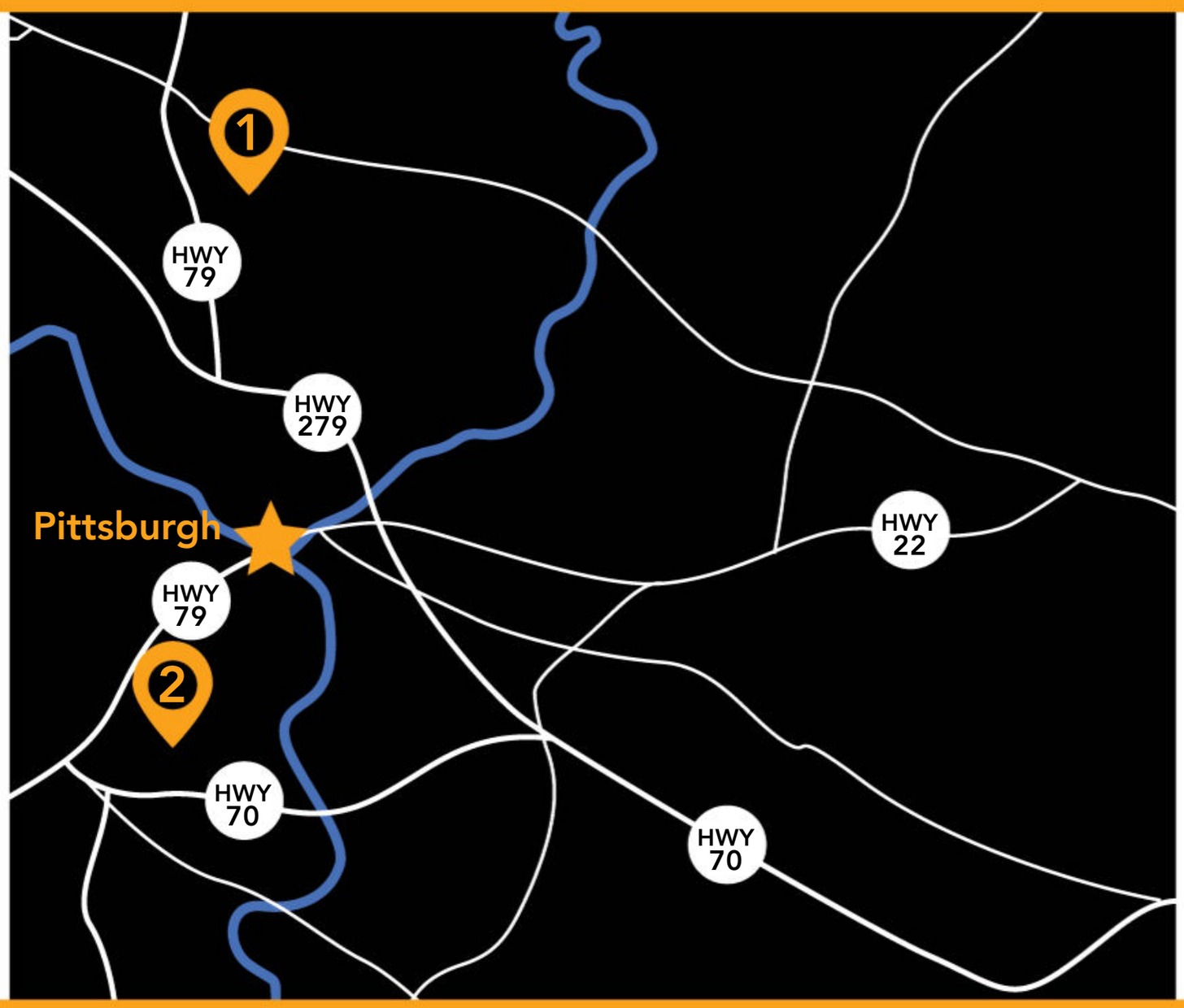

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FROM PAGE 7

Greene was convinced, which always meant the rest of the veteran players didn't need long to catch on, too. But Harris still had to convince Chuck Noll, who didn't make him an immediate starter and then watched him gain 79 yards on 26 carries through the first four games to justify that decision. But Harris started the fifth game, cracked 100 yards for the first time in a win vs. the Oilers, and the Steelers were on their way. Vowing to never allow Noll to bench him again, Harris rushed for over 100 yards in 7 of the next 8 games, and the Steelers went 7-1 in those games. Even a guy who would end up on the wrong side of the Immaculate Reception could see what was happening.

"He carried that team," said Oakland linebacker Phil Villapiano, a starter on the Raiders team that faced the Steelers in the 1972 regular season opener and then in the Divisional Round of those playoffs. "He was the base of that team. As Franco went, that's how the Steelers went, and that's how this town went."

The Immaculate Reception officially is recorded by the NFL as a 60-yard touchdown pass from Terry Bradshaw to Harris, but it was so much more. That play was the catalyst in the Steelers' change from a 39-year-old franchise that never had won a single playoff game or won a single championship into one that has 36 postseason wins and an array of six Lombardi Trophies.

Digest Photo/HARRY HOMA

His father had said similar words in an informal setting, and Dan Rooney said them into a live microphone at his induction into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 2000: "In 1972, Franco Harris came to the Steelers. Before that time, we never won too often. After he came, we never lost. Franco is a very motivating player in a quiet way. He is probably the most caring individual player I have ever met."

A LIFE DEDICATED TO HELPING OTHERS

"You didn't have to ask him twice," said Gordon. "If you told him the situation, he was sympathetic to people who weren't as fortunate or healthy as others. He always responded. It didn't matter what it was. He was such a special person. To see the things he had done in the community for every conceivable cause was amazing."

Starting in 1970, the National Football League began presenting an annual award to one player who best combines an impact in the community with excellence on the field. Franco Harris was the first Steelers player to win the award, and he won it in 1976.

"We nominated, but people were aware of what he did," said Gordon. "His relationship with other people in the league, other players knew what Franco did. He did a lot of things anonymously. He would visit an orphanage, or some facility for the handicapped, and I would hear about it on television. That was Franco."

And that caring sentiment also applied to his former teammates and others he considered to be his friends.

"He was something out of the ordinary. Very special," said Gordon. "I put him on the level of The Chief (Art Rooney Sr.) in doing things for the community, doing things for other people, and oftentimes doing it without being recognized for it. Doing some gesture for someone, if he knew someone was down and out, a former player, it wasn't unusual for him to send him a check. It was Franco. Just a special person.

"I'll tell you an interesting story with Myron (Cope)," continued Gordon. "When Myron was pretty ill and was in Presbyterian Hospital, Franco heard about it. He called me and said, 'Can I visit Myron?' I said, sure. We set up a day, it was a Friday at 3 in the afternoon. Franco was notoriously late. The only time he wasn't late was when he was on the football field. He gets there and we go up to the intensive care unit where Myron was, and Myron was in and out of consciousness. He was out of it most of the time. Myron's daughter Elizabeth was with me, and I said, 'Let Franco go in by himself.' Franco walked over to Myron's bed and said, 'Myron.' Myron looked up, and it was like all of a sudden somebody created a miracle. Myron looked up and became very aware, and Franco was talking to him, and he was responding to Franco. Myron had a grin on his face like you wouldn't imagine. Myron spent about 15 minutes with him. It was almost like he resuscitated him just by calling his name. When Franco was leaving the intensive care unit there were about eight or nine other beds in the unit and a woman came over to Franco and asked him to take a picture with her father because he was a big fan. Franco walked into the unit and stood behind the bed for a picture. When he was leaving, all the medical personnel got his autograph. That was typical of him, and I'm sure it happened multiple other times that I wasn't aware of.

"There is a big dark hole in the Pittsburgh community today."

Harris was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame as part of the Class of 1990 and befitting the kind of player and teammate he was, his acceptance speech was a lot about other people. And he concluded with a message to Steelers fans.

"We didn't know at that time that we were building such a dream, but now the results are in and anyway you look at it, it is truly immeasurable and certainly unforgettable," said Harris. "Good luck and God bless. Thank you very much. Don't forget us."

There's no chance of that. ✦

Digest Photo/KARL ROSER

Labriola on the win over the Ravens

BY **BOB LABRIOLA**
Editor

Over the last four regular seasons, the Steelers have faced the Ravens eight times, and they are 5-3 in those games. Of the three games the Steelers lost, two came when they had to play Duck Hodges at quarterback, and the third came when their quarterback threw three interceptions.

On Jan. 1, the Steelers faced the Ravens at M&T Bank Stadium with their playoff lives hanging by a thread, but Hodges wasn't their quarterback, and the guy who was their quarterback didn't turn the ball over even once. In fact, for the second straight week, in the second straight win-or-it's-over game against an AFC opponent, Kenny Pickett directed a game-deciding scoring drive late in the fourth quarter and capped it off with a touchdown pass with less than a minute left to play.

On the heels of those victories – 13-10 over the Raiders on Christmas Eve and 16-13 over the Ravens on New Year's Day – the Steelers will find themselves hosting a Week 18 game vs. Cleveland with a puncher's chance of squeezing themselves into the AFC playoff field one season after Hall of Fame quarterback Ben Roethlisberger retired. And the nature of those two most recent victories adds additional evidence to the already-strong case that they have found the right guy to follow Roethlisberger.

While it's not at all difficult to use year-to-date statistics to make the case that Pickett is nothing but a bottom-feeder in the NFL's quarterback pecking order, the eyes tell a different story. At the professional level, there is most definitely a difference between playing quarterback and being the quarterback, and over the past 8 weeks, Pickett has become the Steelers quarterback.

After throwing 7 interceptions in his first four regular season appearances as a rookie curiosity, Pickett has thrown only 2 interceptions in his next 8 starts and has made enough plays during those starts to help the Steelers climb out of the 2-6 hole they dug for themselves to reach .500 at 8-8 following Sunday's comeback win vs. the Ravens. Along the way, Pickett has prepared and studied and maintained a one-game-at-a-time focus, and along the way earned the trust of veteran teammates by stepping up and making plays to help them win games.

And it has grown from a couple of big-time NFL throws in the fourth quarter of a win in Indianapolis, to not getting in the way of strong performances by the defense in victories in Atlanta and Carolina by turning the ball over and stressing the unit that was in control of the game, to engineering those game-winning touchdowns drives in the final seconds against the Raiders and Ravens. Pickett may not be anybody's MVP in their fantasy league, but he is becoming an NFL starting quarterback his teammates can trust and then depend upon to deliver for them during those portions of regular season games when winners and losers are determined.

"I think we always had confidence in him," said Harris, the player on whom the Steelers spent their No. 1 pick in the draft before doing the same thing

with Pickett. “It’s really just more about us as a team, just making sure we’re clicking right. You know, earlier in the season, we didn’t really click right, and there were times where, you know, off by this pass, off by this block, this cut, this, this, this. You know, we really came together at the bye week. We were able to come together and make the most of it. So, it’s not that we didn’t believe in him, it’s just us executing on our part to score.”

It’s more than that, because when an NFL offense is in sync, it can appear to be a dance troupe, and in that analogy the quarterback is the choreographer. During the final 46 seconds of the third quarter and all of the fourth – when the Steelers turned a 13-6 deficit into a 16-13 win, Pickett directed scoring drives of 80 yards in 13 plays and then 80 yards in 11 plays. He completed 7-of-12 passes for 100 yards, and he also extended possessions with quarterback sneaks that converted a pair of third-and-1s.

He used his athletic ability to buy time in the pocket and/or create better throwing windows to get the ball to his intended targets. He pushed the ball down the middle of the field when that was available and worked the sideline areas when it wasn’t. Fifteen yards to George Pickens at the right sideline; 21 yards to Diontae Johnson in the same area; 20 yards down the middle to Pat Freiermuth; and 28 yards over the middle to Steven Sims in traffic. It was the correct decision each time, and Pickett’s arm talent made each one work as designed.

“I can’t say enough about our young quarterback,” said Coach Mike Tomlin during the postgame interrogatories. “He smiled in the face of it. He’s always ready to be that guy in the moments that we need him ... I just think we benefited so much from (having) close proximity in the evaluation process. None of us are surprised by what he does from an intangible standpoint. The proximity to him at Pitt really kind of gave us that comfort.”

There should be no more debate about Pickett’s worthiness as a No. 1 draft pick, nor about the Steelers’ decision to use the 20th overall pick on him instead of on an offensive lineman, nor about Tomlin’s decision to turn to him at halftime of the season’s fourth game (against the New York Jets) and commit to him as the Steelers’ starter.

No, he’s not Roethlisberger, and asking or expecting him to be a clone of a player who not only has the statistics to make him a worthy first-ballot Hall of Fame selection but who also is one of only a dozen quarterbacks in the Super Bowl era to have won more than a single Lombardi Trophy is stacking the deck against him. But it’s fair and accurate to point to the victories over the Raiders in sub-zero weather and over the Ravens in Baltimore and acknowledge that Pickett’s role in both of those was Roethlisberger-esque.

Listen to what Tomlin said when asked about the 10-yard touchdown pass to Harris that provided the game-winning points: “The play got extended. He moved to his left. Najee kept his eyes on him. Just two highly competitive guys finishing and making a play. Much like last week, I just like the overall demeanor of the collective in those moments when it’s thick. Nobody is acting funny. You can drill it, but it’s just that it’s a drill. The reality of it is always a little bit different than the drill work.”

On the NBC telecast, Cris Collinsworth said, “Wow. That is wild. What a play by Kenny Pickett ... If Patrick Mahomes made this play, we’d be putting it right in the Hall of Fame. That’s the kind of magical moment in a clutch part of a football game that sets quarterbacks apart.”

Finding a rookie quarterback to thrive in the role of the triggerman in such situations is rare. And finding a rookie quarterback who responds to those kinds of situations as a seasoned NFL veteran deserves to be appreciated.

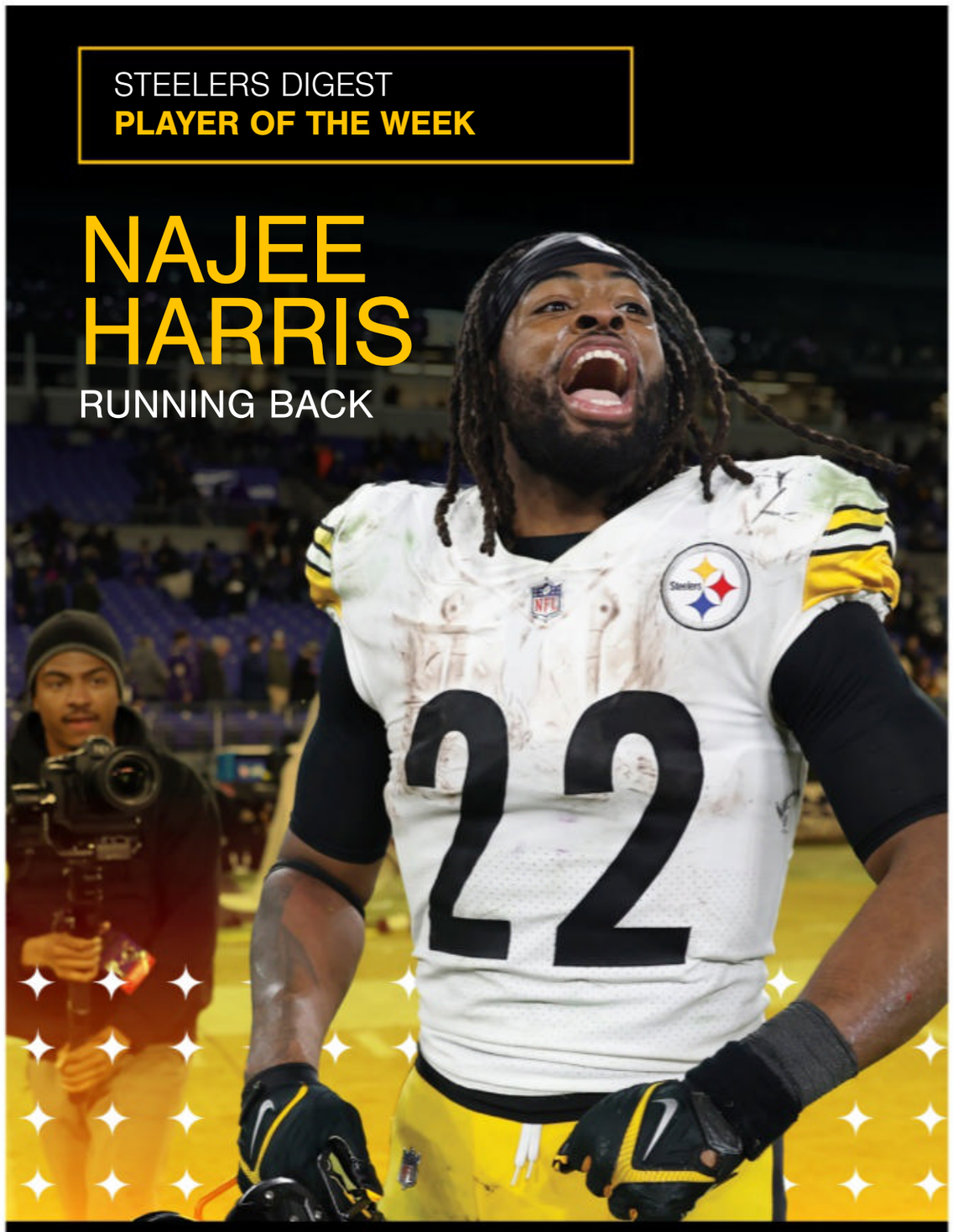
“I’m just focused on, honestly, next week,” Pickett told the media after the game. “I think it’s just the confidence I had in myself is showing up on the field, and I think guys are starting to feel that, which is always good. Going into the huddle and seeing how confident everyone is, as a quarterback, you know they have a lot of belief in you, and I have a lot of belief in those guys in the huddle. So, when that’s there, you definitely have a shot. It’s a step in the right direction. You know there’s still a lot of business to take care of.”

And make no mistake, having the right guy at quarterback is Job 1 in the NFL. ✦

STEELERS DIGEST
PLAYER OF THE WEEK

NAJEE HARRIS

RUNNING BACK



He had the most carries; he finished with the most yards and averaged 5.0 per attempt. In the fourth quarter plus the last 46 seconds of the third quarter, a span where the Steelers offense had three possessions and used those to erase a 13-6 deficit in what ended up being a 16-13 victory over the Ravens at M&T Bank Stadium, he carried 7 times for 45 yards and caught 2 passes for 12 yards, including a 10-yard touchdown that proved to be the game-winner.

Najee Harris was the best running back on the field, and he is the Steelers Digest Player of the Week.

Also considered were Kenny Pickett, who completed 15-of-27 (55.6 percent) for 168 yards, with 1 touchdown, no interceptions, and a rating of 86.7; Minkah Fitzpatrick, who was in on 9 tackles and whose interception (his sixth of the season) with 13 seconds remaining, iced the outcome; Robert Spillane, who finished with 9 tackles, including one for loss; the offensive line of Dan Moore Jr., Kevin Dotson, Mason Cole, James Daniels, and Chuks Okorafor, which as a unit was a driving force in the Steelers outrushing the Ravens, 198-120, converting 10-of-16 (62.5 percent) on third downs, and possessing the ball for 34:14; and Pressley Harvin III, who punted twice for a 49.5-yard gross average, and a 48.5-yard net average, with one inside the 20-yard line. ✦

Digest Photo/JARED WICKERHAM

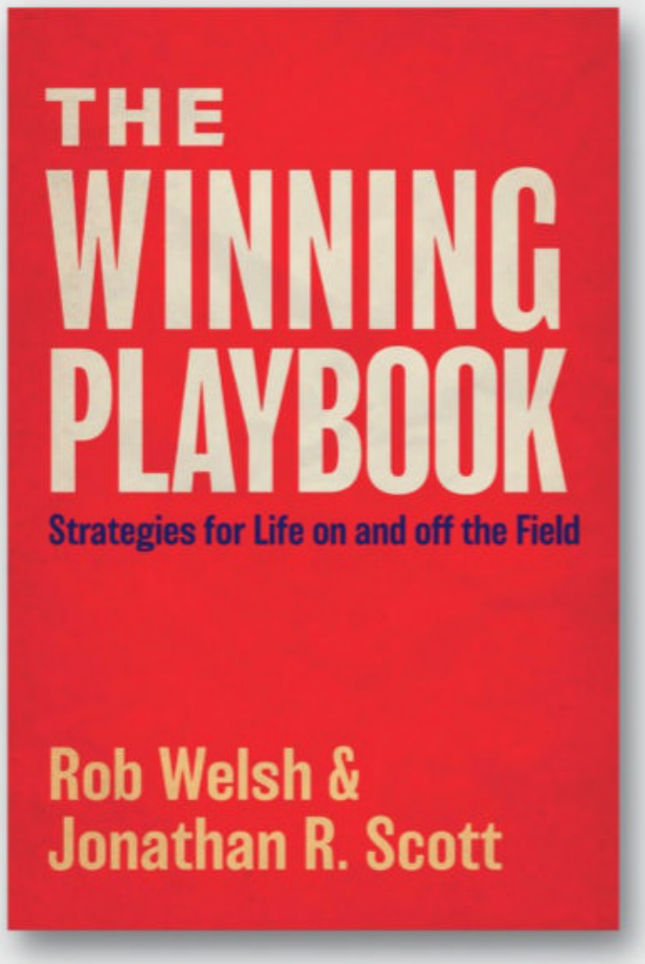
JONATHAN SCOTT

Former Pittsburgh Steeler

“I live by the Five Fs: faith, family, finance, fitness, and fun.

They’re all fundamental to the reason I co-wrote The Winning Playbook. I want to empower people young and old to live their best healthy financial life. I want to inspire young people especially on how to control their finances and understand the financial system.”

— Former NFL Lineman, Jonathan Scott



Jonathan Ray Scott is from Dallas, Texas. A former Pittsburgh Steelers lineman, a ten-year veteran of the National Football League as an offensive tackle, Jonathan was also a member of the 2005 National Champion Texas Longhorns football team. Jonathan’s life off the field has been as successful as his time on the field with experience in real estate, finance, education, coaching, executive leadership, and the music industry.

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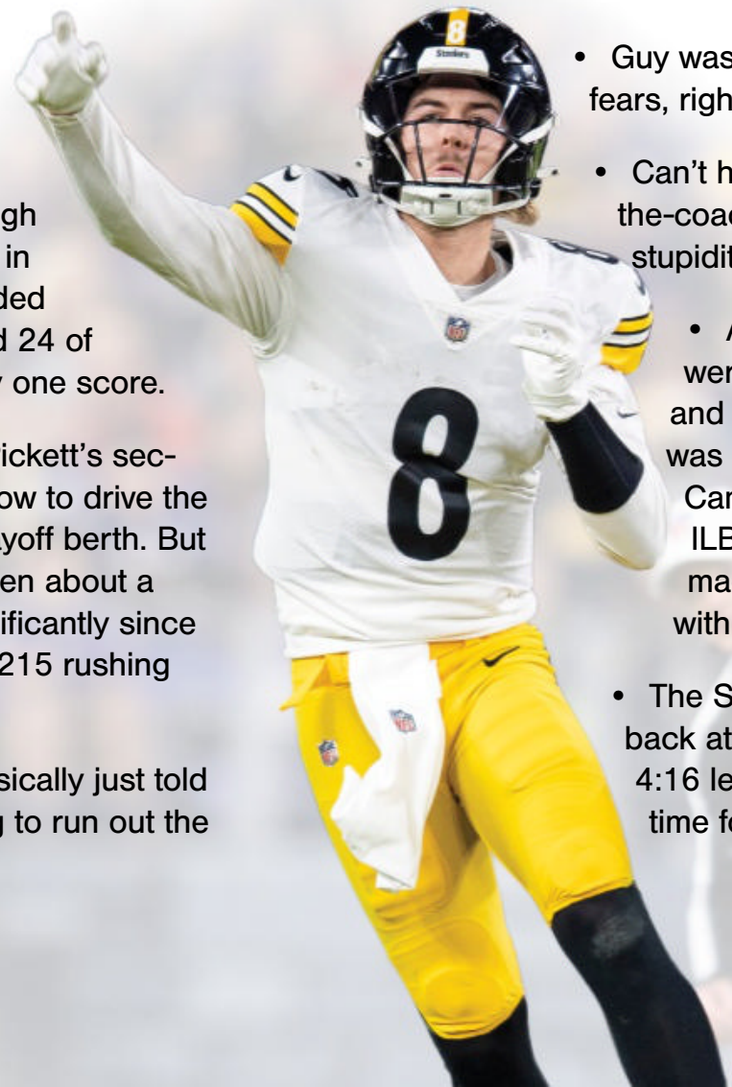
Just My Opinion By Jim Wexell

From the notebook of a sportswriter who doesn't know whether to call him Captain Comeback, the Comeback Kid, or maybe Kenny Komeback.

- I'll open the mailbox for suggestions.
- In a huge game marked by the first-line play of six Steelers rookies, Kenny Pickett ran away with the team's Rookie of the Year Award Sunday night in Baltimore.
- Yep. It always goes to the quarterback.
- It's the eyes in the huddle, as his linemen said.
- It's the culture, though, as well.
- Oh. That's right. We're firing the coach at the end of the season. Hopefully the next guy doesn't screw things up after he wins with Mike Tomlin's players.
- Snarky Jim. That's what they're calling me this year.
- And a Happy New Year to you, too.
- As the song goes, nothing changes on New Year's Day, as the Steelers and Ravens have shown us once again.

- According to T.J. Watt, that's 33 games in a row between these teams that have been decided by three points or fewer.
- He exaggerated a bit. It's actually 18 of the last 30 games – since John Harbaugh began coaching the Ravens in 2008 – that have been decided by three points or fewer. And 24 of those have been decided by one score.
- Much will be written about Pickett's second late-game charge in a row to drive the Steelers to the brink of a playoff berth. But just as much should be written about a defense that has grown significantly since the Ravens pummeled it for 215 rushing yards only three weeks ago.
- In that game, the Ravens basically just told the Steelers they were going to run out the clock, and did.
- This time, the Steelers – who came out in a 4-4-3 to the joy of those of us still studying out of the old school – held the Ravens to 26 yards of offense over the final 18 minutes.
- The most significant stop occurred after the Steelers had crept to within 13-9 on a Chris Boswell 33-yard field goal with 9:44 left to play. Justice Hill returned the subsequent kickoff to the Pittsburgh 40-yard line, which as we've learned over the years, is within Justin Tucker's range.
- Yep. The best kicker in the league has 58-yard range. Easily. He's 56-of-79 from 50-plus in his career, 8-of-13 this year, and only last year kicked the longest field goal in NFL history, 66 yards.
- But T.J. Watt and Cam Heyward tackled J.K. Dobbins for a 2-yard loss on first down. Watt then pressured QB Tyler Huntley into an incompletion, and Terrell Edmunds blew up a third-and-12 pass to force a punt.
- Perhaps John Harbaugh thought backing up a rookie QB inside his 10-yard line with 8:47 to play was the right call. I thought attempting a 60-yard field goal with Tucker was the better call.
- Pickett did deliver one first down, but the Steelers had to punt. I didn't check Twitter at the time, but I'm sure many called for the firing of Tomlin after punting on fourth-and-18 with 6:42 left.
- Guy was basically living in his fears, right?
- Can't help myself. This fire-the-coach stuff is reaching epic stupidity.
- Anyway, the Ravens were third-and-2 at their 44 and handed to Dobbins. He was blown up for no gain by Cam Heyward and rookie ILB Mark Robinson, who made his first career start with aplomb.
- The Steelers got the ball back at their 20-yard line with 4:16 left, more than enough time for Kenny the Kid.



Digest Photo/KARL ROSER

- No, I haven't settled on that as Pickett's moniker. I just like to throw something in the face of the "experts" who've been critical of the rookie as a self-ascribed "truth." They've concluded that Pickett's being overrated because he came out of Pitt.
- I came out of Pitt and haven't cared about any of their QBs since Dan Marino. But Pickett won me over in the preseason.
- Maybe he won over the last of the naysayers with his game-winning drive Sunday night. He threw a beautiful 20-yarder to Pat Freiermuth to the 50, and then hit Steven Sims for 28 to the Baltimore 22 just before the two-minute warning. Another sneak converted another third-and-1, and then the coup de grace, escaping the grasp of Jason Pierre-Paul to complete a 10-yard bullet to Najee Harris on third-and-8 for the game-winner with 56 seconds left.
- "Pickett doesn't blink!" game announcer Mike Tirico exclaimed.
- "If Patrick Mahomes made that play, we'd be putting it in the Hall of Fame!" game analyst Cris Collinsworth exclaimed.
- "There's too much time left!" Steelers fans exclaimed.
- Well, maybe that was my thought, but it was time for Watt, Heyward, Minkah Fitzpatrick and the rest of this surging Steelers defense not to blink.
- The Ravens did convert their first third down of the half on that final possession, but Fitzpatrick shut down another game with another interception.
- For Pickett, it was a second consecutive late-game charge. For the defense, it was a third consecutive game of allowing less than 250 total yards. For the coach, it was yet another case of keeping his team focused and motivated when most would've "lost the locker room."
- Not with this culture.
- Nothing changes on New Year's Day. ✦

(Jim Wexell, the author of "Polamalu: The Inspirational Story of Pittsburgh Steelers Strong Safety Troy Polamalu" has been contributing to Steelers Digest as a reporter and columnist for decades.)

Digest Photo/HARRY HOMA

Tight, defensive battle had ‘Immaculate’ ending

BY **TERESA VARLEY**
Assistant Editor

It is a play that will forever be a part of Steelers history.

A play fans from all generations have talked about for years and will continue to talk about for years to come. A play that happened 50 years ago, on Saturday, Dec. 23, 1972. A play that was voted the Greatest Play in NFL history.

A play that quite simply, was immaculate.

The Steelers were hosting the Oakland Raiders in an AFC Divisional Round game in front of 50,327 fans at Three Rivers Stadium. Because of the black-out rules at the time, the game wasn’t televised within a 75-mile radius of Pittsburgh, which forced fans not lucky enough to have tickets to either listen to the radio broadcast or to watch the game.

Those who packed Three Rivers Stadium definitely brought the energy of the entire city with them, hoping and dreaming for the team’s first-ever playoff win.

The game was a defensive battle through the first half, a 0-0 tie when both teams headed to their locker room. In the second half the Steelers took a 6-0 lead thanks to two field goals by Roy Gerela.

The Raiders weren’t to be denied though. Quarterback Ken Stabler got his team on the scoreboard and into the lead when he scrambled for a 30-yard touchdown to give the Raiders a 7-6 lead with just 1:17 to play.

Things looked bleak for the Steelers, as they quickly found themselves in a hole, their season possibly coming to a disappointing end.

Franco Harris is about to elude Oakland DB Jimmy Warren to complete the Immaculate Reception, and the celebration already has begun.

Digest Photo

Quarterback Terry Bradshaw and the offense were facing an intimidating fourth-and-10 from the Pittsburgh 40-yard line with 22 seconds remaining.

While under pressure, Bradshaw threw the ball down the middle and in the direction of Frenchy Fuqua, and as the ball arrived, Fuqua collided with Raiders' safety Jack Tatum, the ball ricocheted back toward the line of scrimmage and Franco Harris miraculously scooped it out of the air and took off running for a 60-yard touchdown that gave the Steelers the 13-7 win amidst a wild celebration.

"I don't think the fans knew what happened," said Fuqua, who was knocked to the ground after the collision. "Everyone I spoke to after I got up off the ground said, 'What happened, what happened?' Someone said, 'It's a miracle.' Then we had to go through that long, long wait when the officials all got together, and it seemed like an eternity."

It might have been appropriate to have to wait an eternity for a play that will live for eternity.

"One of the most exhilarating things to watch during that play is what happened after the play," said Harris. "When you see the fans' reaction and how they jumped on the field, hugging players, players hugging fans. That is a great visual and a great feeling to see that moment. It was like the whole stadium erupted and that feeling everybody had on the field. You could see it and you could feel it through the film, how special it was."

Steelers founder Art Rooney Sr. was in the press box watching the game, but after Stabler scored he headed to the locker room to greet the team, to congratulate the players on a fine season, and to try and console them. While he was headed there, Harris scored.

"I mention to people that The Chief, Mr. Art Rooney Sr., got on the elevator thinking we lost and when he got off, he got off a winner," said Harris.

While Art Rooney Sr. missed the play, his grandson and current Steelers President Art Rooney II was on the sideline watching it all up close, working as a part-time equipment manager while still in college.

SEE NEXT PAGE ▷

"The play happened almost right in front of me," said Rooney. "I don't think any of us were expecting anything. After Ken Stabler made his run and we were down to our fourth down there, I can't say that any of us were expecting what happened at that point, that's for sure."

When Harris scooped the ball into his hands and took it 60 yards for the game winning touchdown, Three Rivers Stadium exploded.

"People came running out of the stands," said Rooney. "It was just chaos. It was just a wild scene. A player who had played for us back in the 1960s named Brady Keys came running out of the stands, and he came running out to me and got me in a bear hug, was jumping up and down, and I almost passed out. It was just a wild, wild scene.

"Most people don't remember that we actually finished the game with people on the field. The officials decided that it would be too hard to clear the field, and there were only a few seconds left. We kicked the extra point and ran the last couple of plays with people surrounding the field. One of my jobs at that point was kind of watching our equipment. We were trying to make sure we got our equipment off the field. I'm pretty sure we lost a few pieces of equipment to the fans that day.

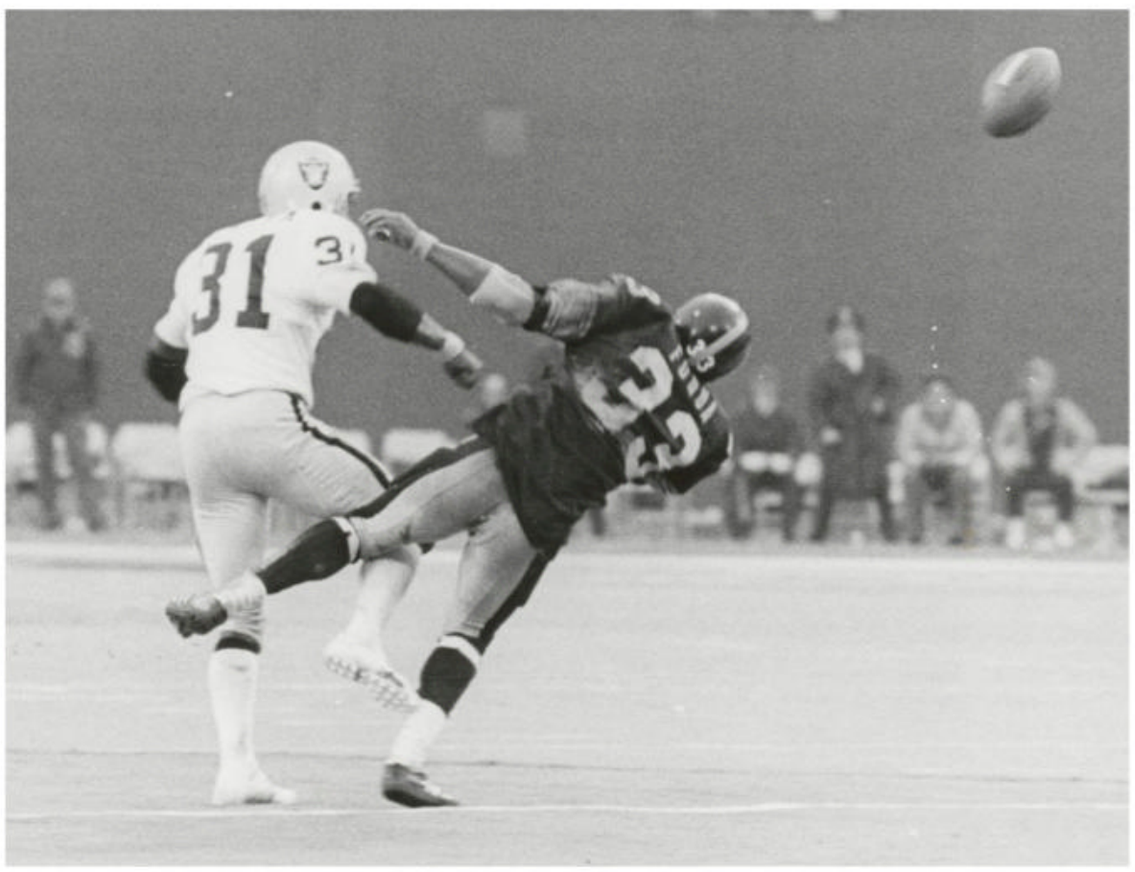
"It was a wild, wild scene."

Through the passage of time the excitement of the play has remained and will always remain something nobody in Steelers Nation will ever forget, whether they saw it happen in person or learned about it years later.

"The play was special in so many ways," said Harris. "Part of it was because of the prior history of the Pittsburgh Steelers. The prior fan reaction and feeling about the team. People always said the Steelers found a way to lose. I look at this play and we found a way to win. Even though we needed something immaculate to make it happen, we found a way to win. What made it special is that drive and feeling and attitude of finding a way to win has never left.

"This play started our first step into what was to become an incredible run that continues today."

As a part of the 50th Anniversary celebration the Steelers retired Harris' No. 32 jersey at halftime of the game against the Las Vegas Raiders. Harris' No. 32 joined Ernie Stautner's No. 70, and Joe Greene's No. 75 as the only other numbers to be retired officially by the Steelers franchise. ✦



What exactly happened during the collision involving Jack Tatum (31) and Frenchy Fuqua (33) might never be known.

Digest Photo/HARRY HOMA

Hanneman's role in history was a 'mistake'

BY **TERESA VARLEY**
Assistant Editor

If it weren't for Craig Hanneman, there is a good chance the Immaculate Reception never would have happened.

And before you Google "Craig Hanneman," just keep on reading.

Hanneman was a rookie defensive lineman for the Steelers in 1972, a backup on a unit that was loaded with names like Joe Greene, Dwight White, L.C. Greenwood and Ernie Holmes.

On Dec. 23, 1972, in the AFC Divisional Round game against the Oakland Raiders at Three Rivers Stadium, he was given an assignment.

With the Steelers defense playing stingy, holding the Raiders scoreless for over 58 minutes of football and hanging on to a 6-0 lead, Hanneman was sent into the game with one job and one job only.

Get pressure on the quarterback.

"George Perles, who was the defensive line coach at the time, he called me to stand beside him," recalled Hanneman. "He sent me in for Dwight White with the simple instruction...we got to get pressure on the quarterback."

But once he got on the field, and linebacker Andy Russell called a stunt, things changed. Did they ever change.

Instead of getting pressure, Hanneman got beat.

"When I got to the line of scrimmage, Andy Russell, who was the right outside linebacker called a stunt, and my first obligation on that was to engage the tackle to create a gap for Andy to go between the tackle and the guard (and pressure the quarterback)," said Hanneman. "Art Shell, who later became their head coach, was the offensive tackle. He was the second

Reserve defensive lineman Craig Hanneman was sent into the game in the fourth quarter with one simple instruction.

Digest Photo/HARRY HOMA

biggest offensive lineman in the league at the time. And I think I was the second smallest defensive player. Art Shell took a deep step back to the inside, which for me to try and engage him brought me in deeper and more inside than I should have been to fulfill my ultimate responsibility, which was to contain. Because Andy was inside, I had to replace his outside responsibilities. And the rest, as they say, is history.

"I lost containment, which is my third and final obligation and most important one, and quarterback Kenny Stabler ran around for 30 yards and a touchdown. So, all of a sudden, the score is 7-6 in favor of Oakland."

The play-by-play read as follows:

"Stabler, almost caught in the backfield, circled left end and ran untouched into the end zone for a 30-yard touchdown run."

It was then that many thought all was lost, even Steelers founder Art Rooney Sr., who headed for the locker room to greet the team and console the players.

But it wasn't over.

The Steelers got the ball with 1:13 to play at their 20-yard line. Terry Bradshaw completed a 9-yard pass to Franco Harris, and then hit Frenchy Fuqua for 11-yards and a first down. Three straight incompletions put the Steelers in a major hole – a fourth-and-10 at their 40-yard line with just 22 seconds remaining.

And as Hanneman said, the rest is history.

While under pressure, Bradshaw threw the ball in the direction of Fuqua and as it arrived, he collided with Raiders' safety Jack Tatum, the ball ricocheted back, and Harris miraculously scooped it out of the air and took off running for a 60-yard touchdown that gave the Steelers the 13-7 win and a wild celebration ensued.

And the Immaculate Reception was born.

"As it's most commonly reported, after I screwed up, we needed to score," said Hanneman. "The Immaculate Reception play was necessitated by the deficit that had been created. We were up 6-0. And Oakland drove the length of the field, and then scored after I was in there."

While everyone in Pittsburgh celebrated, Hanneman breathed a sigh of relief.

"Franco was not only a hero to everybody in Pittsburgh, he was a hero to me too," said Hanneman. "I imagine life would be quite different today if that hadn't happened. There's one sportswriter about 10 years ago who wrote I would have been a Bill Buckner-like figure forever.

"It was a terrible feeling. It's not about you. It's about the team and I let the team down. I let George Perles down. He sent me in with a job to do and the assignment changed when Andy called the stunt, but nonetheless I had a new responsibility, and I didn't fulfill it.

"I had a decent rookie year. I felt really good about everything, but that was something you never get over. Obviously, it necessitated the heroics that followed. All's well that ends well as they say, but still it lingers."

But what also lingers, is that if Stabler never scored on that play, there is a really good chance the Steelers aren't in the situation they found themselves in for the Immaculate Reception to happen.

"One event leads to another and there's no question there would not have been an Immaculate Reception," said Hanneman. "Just the time that was left, if they hadn't scored right then, or not at all, there are all kinds of hypotheticals you can look at. But one thing, there wouldn't be exactly that same play. Who knows what outcome there would have been, or how much time there would have been left for us to score if they had scored later. There are so many what-ifs.

"I guess there is perversely some small satisfaction that with all the joy and celebrations that took place, somebody had to screw up. So, I guess I did my job to necessitate what was voted to be the greatest play of all time." ✦

The tale of the play that got away

BY **TERESA VARLEY**
Assistant Editor

In his 50 seasons working for the Steelers, Bob McCartney filmed hundreds of thousands of plays, from training camp, to preseason games, to regular season games, to postseason games, to every practice that led up to all of those games. And among those plays are the best of the best in Steelers history.

Except one. One that was the best not just in Steelers history, but also in NFL history.

The Immaculate Reception.

It's not because McCartney wasn't filming the game. It's because, well, quite simply, he ran out of film before the game ended.

While McCartney had filmed practice on occasion for the team during the 1972 season, he never filmed a game because he also was working part-time helping in other departments, including the equipment and training rooms.

But on Dec. 23, 1972, help was needed when the Steelers were hosting the Raiders in the AFC Divisional Playoffs, and McCartney was asked to film the game from the end zone location high above the playing surface at Three Rivers Stadium.

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Bob McCartney, from his perch inside Three Rivers Stadium, sets up the equipment he would use to film the 1972 AFC Divisional Round Game between the Steelers and the Raiders.

Digest Photo

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FROM PAGE 17

And during that game, the most iconic play in Steelers history occurred.

"I was in the end zone. Opposite the scoreboard," said McCartney, now the team's Director of Facilities. "The Pirates radio booth was up there, and that's what we used as an end zone location.

"So, a little bit of history. The end zone filming position didn't exist back in 1972. We were just starting to take end zone pictures, film of the games because somebody had come up with an idea that this angle might be beneficial to the coaches."

With that in mind, photographer/cameraman Les Banos, who was shooting from the 50-yard line, asked McCartney to help because they were short-handed. McCartney was more than willing.

"I had never shot a game in my life," said McCartney. "I had just started to shoot practice with a camera that the Steelers had bought. I was working in the equipment room, and I had shot practice at training camp and used to drive it from Latrobe back to Pittsburgh on a daily basis to get it processed and then drive it back to Latrobe and deliver it to Chuck Noll. During the 1972 season I was working in the equipment room helping Tony Parisi and Jack Hart, and also helping Ralph Berlin the trainer. And every once in a while, we'd go out and shoot practice.

McCartney: "I told (Coach Noll) what happened. It was my first game. I shot the film. And oh, by the way, Chuck, at the 2-minute warning, I ran out of film ... It was my first game, and I didn't know exactly what I was doing. He understood."

Digest Photo

"I got a call from Les asking me if I'd go ahead and shoot the end zone (for the game vs. the Raiders) and I said sure, no problem. It was the first game that I ever shot. And I cruised along. I had four magazines of 400-feet of film per magazine. They told me that'll be more than enough. Plenty. We had four reels of film that was kind of standard for anything that you did, two for offense, one in the first half, one in the second, and then one for defense and one for special teams.

"I cruise through the first three quarters, and I changed my last magazine on my camera. I started to shoot and of course now the game gets a little tense. And I don't want to miss anything. So, I'm starting early and running long on plays.

"And as it turns out at the 2-minute warning, I ran out of film."

At this point the Steelers had a 6-0 lead after two Roy Gerela field goals, but there was so much more that would happen. And McCartney was in a panic.

"I had a film changing bag, which was a cloth bag that was a portable dark room, and you could go in and change the film in the magazine," said McCartney. "If you were good at it, you could do it in under two minutes. Well, I had never done it before, but I tried it. I'd never had to do it under pressure. So, we're at the 2-minute warning. I'm in a changing bag. And I'm fumbling. I was thinking, this isn't going to work right. The game comes back, the referee blows the whistle, and we're going to start again. I was like, this is totally ridiculous. There's no way I'm going to do this. It wasn't required as part of the film-exchange at that point in time. I literally packed up the gear and went downstairs on the elevator, and I walked up the hallway. I was going to drop the equipment that we had off in Les Banos' office, which was behind home plate based on the layout of Three Rivers."

While McCartney was dropping off the film, the Raiders took a 7-6 lead, and it was looking like the Steelers were going to lose, with many fans already heading towards the exits.

Then it happened.

"I dropped the film off, and there was a window by home plate. I went out and looked out the window and I see Franco Harris running. And (equipment manager) Tony Parisi is in the end zone with his hands up and the crowd goes crazy. Jim Boston (who was in charge of contract negotiations and NFL dealings) was on the phone with the press box, and when the referee came out and signaled it was a touchdown, I went running up the hallway. I was so excited. We had just won a playoff game.

"I ran into the locker room, which is where I was used to going after games to help the equipment staff. And as soon as I flung open the door, Mr. (Art) Rooney, The Chief, was there. He looked at me, and he said, 'Bob it was a good season.' I said, 'No, Mr. Rooney, we won the game,' and he looked at me and by that time here comes the team and everybody's ranting and raving and yelling and screaming.

"And that was it. The Immaculate Reception was the first game that I had ever filmed, not even completely."

Fifty years ago in the NFL, game film/video was not what it is today. While today everyone would have been scrambling for the view of the angle McCartney was supposed to have shot, nobody even asked him about it.

"I don't even think I saw Les. He was worried about his stuff," said McCartney. "He had four reels of film that were sitting in a case in his office, and he knew whatever was in there was what he had. I don't think we ever talked about it. Once the game was over and we won, it was just, OK, it is what it is."

McCartney thought Coach Chuck Noll, who was a film and camera buff, would ask him about his angle, but that never happened either.

"I was embarrassed," admitted McCartney. "We're going to win a playoff game. My first thought was, 'Oh, my God, I missed this play. I'm going hear about it from Chuck.' Chuck was very into teaching. He taught me what he wanted to see and what was the best way to do it. He was always trying to help me.

"I told him what happened. It was my first game. I shot the film. And oh, by the way, Chuck, at the 2-minute warning, I ran out of film. Of course, I had to explain to him that I tried to get into the changing bag to change the film, but I was too nervous. It was my first game, and I didn't know exactly what I was doing. He understood." ✦

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Digest Photo/ARRON ANASTASIA

Defense delivers key stops to set up game-winning drive

BY **BOB LABRIOLA**
Editor

It was halftime, and it wasn't going to be a typical one. The temporary stage was assembled. The former players who wanted to be there in person to honor their teammate and friend even though it was bitterly cold and Christmas Eve at that, were seated in the folding chairs adjacent to the stage with their Terrible Towels at the ready. It was time. Time to do what everyone came to see, what was the highlight of the Steelers 2022 regular season schedule, what had been planned for months.

Steelers President Art Rooney II stood on the stage behind the microphone and began. "It wasn't supposed to be like this," Rooney said. "The big man was supposed to be with us tonight."

"The big man" to whom Rooney referred was Franco Harris, and by the time this game was over it felt like Harris was there with them, doing what he had done so many times for the Steelers – help them win a football game.

Back in early September, the Steelers announced their plans to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the Immaculate Reception and as the cherry on top of that sundae the team was going to retire Harris' No. 32 to allow him to join Ernie Stautner (No. 70) and Joe Greene (No. 75) as the only men in that exclusive club. And the ceremony was to take place at halftime of the Steelers game against the Raiders on Dec. 24 in Pittsburgh, a re-creation of the game that contained the Immaculate Reception and took the franchise from a life in Loserville to the precipice of a dynasty.

But real life can be cruel, and real life intervened a couple of days before the weekend-long celebration could begin. Franco Harris died on Wednesday, Dec. 21, and the world immediately became a lesser place.

The grief and profound sense of loss tempered a lot of the fun that had been planned to celebrate Harris, to celebrate his starring role in the what the league itself labeled the Greatest Play in NFL History. After the fun, the plan was to and put an exclamation point on his stature in franchise history by making him only the third Steelers player to have his jersey retired, all while doing that in conjunction with a game against the same franchise that got to experience the Greatest Play in NFL History from the other sideline in 1972.

Like they did on Dec. 23, 1972, the Steelers defeated the Raiders with the deciding points being scored in the final minute of the fourth quarter. This 13-10 Steelers victory cannot compare in significance to what happened 50 years ago, but what is fair is to acknowledge this group of Steelers grew professionally by finding a way to walk off the grass with a victory.

"I'm just so thankful of the effort of the guys," said Coach Mike Tomlin while sitting behind the mic wearing the No. 32 model jersey the whole team wore to honor the last player who ever will wear it. "We had a chance to be a part of Steelers history tonight and we don't take that lightly. We're just so appreciative of the ground that's been laid by those who have come before us, the men like this man's jersey that I'm wearing right here.

SEE NEXT PAGE ▷

Lynne Bingham
REALTOR

The Bingham Team – Opening Doors

Bingham came to Pittsburgh in 1982 when her husband, Craig Bingham, was drafted by the Pittsburgh Steelers. After 14 years in retail, Lynne transitioned to a career in Real Estate. And oh, what a career she has developed! Her first year in real estate she was named Rookie of the Year by Howard Hanna's USC office. Fast-forward to today and she has now reached #1 Real Estate Agent status in the Southwest Region in 2021. For 17 years she was a top producer. Yes, Lynne clearly knows real estate.

For more information about Lynne Bingham and The Bingham Team at Howard Hanna Real Estate, please reach out to Lynne by cell at 412.855.9154 or via her email address at LBingham@howardhanna.com. You may also view her website at TheBinghamTeam.com.

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FROM PAGE 21

Digest Photo/ABIGAIL DEAN

"We get to enjoy the fruits of their labor daily just in terms of the standard of the expectation here in Pittsburgh, the relationship we have with our fan base. We just want to honor him, his teammates, and all the men who have come before us, who made the black-and-gold what it is. So, we're just thankful to get the victory. I think it was a grow-up evening for us. Obviously, this was not an easy game, but we showed resolve, we complemented one another, we stood up and didn't blink, even when it got thick."

The Steelers didn't play a perfect game 50 years ago vs. the Raiders, and they fell well short of that on Christmas Eve at Acrisure Stadium. Like it did at Three Rivers Stadium 50 years ago, the defense carried most of the day.

The Raiders won the coin toss and despite brutal weather conditions – 8 degrees with winds making it feel like minus-10 – they took the ball. They moved right down the field, 72 yards in 14 plays, to take a 7-0 lead. The Raiders scored a touchdown in the game's first 8 minutes but didn't score another in the next 52; they gained 72 yards on their opening possession, but only 129 more in their 9 other possessions. Just for the record, those 9 possessions ended this way: punt, punt, field goal, interception, interception, punt, punt, punt, interception. Josh Jacobs came to Pittsburgh as the NFL's leading rusher, and after gaining 26 yards on 5 carries during that opening drive, he gained 18 yards on his other 10 carries in the game.

But as was the situation in 1972, that one Raiders touchdown would be something the Steelers could not hurdle until the waning moments.

"We continued to punt the ball and support our defense, which was playing well," said Tomlin, whose decision-making in terms of putting the game in the hands of his defense was the same way Chuck Noll conducted his orchestra, and just like Noll's there were some groans from the paying customers. "They continued to deliver until we caught fire and finished some drives.

"Don't get me wrong, it wasn't lack of moving the ball," continued Tomlin as he switched the spotlight on the offense. "We just didn't finish drives. We missed a couple of field goals, threw an interception. You know, just got to be better in those areas, and we'll keep working. But as a collective, particularly some of the young offensive skill guys, I thought it was a grow-up night. (Pickett and Pickens and Najee and Freiermuth and Diontae), all of them. They showed poise and resolve and made the necessary plays, and so we move forward. We move forward with a really good Christmas."

There were stretches of the game where the unfinished drives, for the reasons Tomlin cited, were annoying to watch even in a climate-controlled environment, which the seats in the Acrisure Stadium bowl certainly were not.

It's time now for the weekly George Pickens whine, because he again was not targeted enough. Pickens had five passes thrown his way, and he caught

them all – one converted a third-and-2; another gained 25 yards, which made it the Steelers longest pass play of the game; another gained 8 on a second-and-16; one was a dump-down on third-and-9; and the last was the game-winning 14-yard touchdown. The Steelers called 40-plus pass plays, and Pickens only being targeted on less than 12 percent of them is difficult to understand.

Credit is due for the play-call that sent Connor Heyward around the end and into the secondary untouched for a 21-yard gain that clinched the victory, but the Steelers waited too long to start throwing the ball to their backs (Harris and Jaylen Warren) on the move even though the year-to-date statistics showed that to be a weakness of the Raiders defense. Over the previous 6 games, the Steelers averaged 34.2 rushes and 144 yards on the ground, but 27 attempts for 106 vs. the Raiders (26 for 85 without the semi-gadget run by Heyward at the end) seemed a curious approach to the weather conditions when coupled with 40-plus pass attempts for a rookie quarterback coming off his second concussion since Oct. 16.

But as Tomlin pointed out, it was a grow-up day for the young, developing eligibles on offense. With 2:55 and 2 timeouts remaining, the Steelers had a first-and-10 at their 24-yard line and needed a touchdown to win. Pickett completed 7-of-9 for 75 yards and the touchdown, and he executed a quarterback sneak to convert a fourth-and-1; Freiermuth caught 2 passes for 14 yards; Harris caught 2 for 24 yards; and Pickens caught the touchdown.

And then when Cam Sutton made a diving catch 37 yards downfield with 19 seconds left for an interception that sealed the deal, the tribute to Franco Harris was complete.

"I think for us it was just a tip of a cap to not only a Steelers legend, but a great man, a person in the community you could always count on, a guy who even when he retired, he still wanted to be your teammate," said Cam Heyward, who came onto the field carrying a big flag adorned with No. 32 and left with 2 sacks, a tackle for loss, and a pass batted at the line of scrimmage on his stats line.

"I can say from my time being here, Franco was welcoming to me with open arms. With everything building up to this and getting the chance to talk to Franco, you know, there are so many joyous moments we've had with him, and it hurt so many in this community to lose a guy like him ... Just say that we loved him, we'll continue to love him, and we appreciate all that he's done for us." ✦

During the halftime ceremony at Acrisure Stadium retiring Franco Harris' No. 32, Art Rooney II, Dana, and Dok share an emotional moment.

Digest Photo/ARRON ANASTASIA

STEELERS DIGEST
PLAYER OF THE WEEK

CAM HEYWARD

DEFENSIVE TACKLE

The Steelers trailed, 10-6, and the game clock showed just under 10 minutes left in the fourth quarter. Las Vegas had the ball, the NFL's leading rusher in Josh Jacobs in the backfield, and a dynamic receiver named Davante Adams on the perimeter. The Steelers had Cam Heyward.

The Pittsburgh offense would need two possessions to put together the game-winning touchdown drive that ended up covering 76 yards in 10 plays, which meant the defense needed two stops vs. the Raiders to get the ball back for the offense. During those two Las Vegas possessions, Heyward had 3 tackles and a sack, and the Raiders ran only 8 plays and punted twice.

Heyward finished with 7 tackles, including 3 for loss, 2 sacks, and a pass batted at the line of scrimmage. He is the Steelers Digest Player of the Week. ✦

Digest Photo/ABIGAIL DEAN

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Maulet was molded by life lessons

BY **TERESA VARLEY**
Assistant Editor

In an area of New Orleans, removed from all the glitz and glamour of Bourbon Street and Mardi Gras revelers, is the Lower Ninth Ward.

It's an area that wasn't on the radar until the summer of 2005, when Hurricane Katrina ripped through Louisiana and left the devastated Lower Ninth Ward under water after storm surges and levee breaches wiped away what little many residents had.

For Steelers safety Arthur Maulet, it was just another gut punch in a difficult life growing up in the Lower Ninth Ward.

"Tough neighborhood. Didn't have much," said Maulet. "I was the oldest of five, two brothers, two sisters. Just trying to survive. Welfare family. No mother. Mother on drugs. Dad not in my life. My grandfather took care of us when we were smaller.

"I was homeless for a point in time in my life. Sleeping on a church bus. Dropped out of school twice. A long road. Going through Hurricane Katrina. Dealing with that. Not knowing what was going to be my next move for a young kid."

Stop for a minute and think about all of that. Then think about being a 12-year-old and losing the little that you did have. That was Maulet's life.

When Katrina hit, his younger siblings were evacuated out of New Orleans, but Maulet and his grandfather, Anthony Hicks, stayed behind with the assumption it would just be a passing issue. It was far from that.

For two weeks the two lived in the New Orleans Superdome, set up as a shelter for those who truly had nowhere else to go.

"That is when I hit a really rough patch in my life," recalled Maulet. "Honestly, it was a lot."

Maulet paused for a moment. His eyes clearly telling a story he wasn't sure he wanted his voice to echo. But after a minute, he continued.

"I stayed with grandpa. My other brothers and sisters left," said Maulet. "Had to stay in the Superdome. Just seeing what everybody was going through there made me not worry about the obstacles that I go through now. I always say it's easy now.

"Living in the Superdome and just seeing thousands of cots everywhere. Some people dying there. Stuff falling from the ceiling killing people. Young females getting raped. People remember hearing about things. It was bad. For me to be able to survive that and have an opportunity to do what I am doing now, I am forever grateful for that."

That survival took a while though. Realizing what little they once had in New Orleans was gone, they moved to Ann Arbor, Michigan, simply because it was a place where their church was able to fund a home for them.

"My grandfather took us all there and really looked out for us," said Maulet. "He was a strong man. Very Army disciplined type of guy. Going to wake you up bright and early in the morning to shovel some snow. Going to make sure that, for me and my brothers and sisters, that things were taken care of. He was an independent contractor, so he had to go to work, sometimes 5, 6 o'clock in the morning. He taught me how to get up in the morning and how to take care of a family, how to take care of my brothers and sisters and own up to being a young man early."

It was a different atmosphere for Maulet living in Ann Arbor, a place he never envisioned he would land. But it was life-changing for one reason.

It's where he fell in love with football.

"I definitely developed my love of football there," said Maulet. "I remember I used to ask why everyone wants to park in front of our house, why do they want to park in our yard. I would ask my grandpa that. He told me the University of Michigan is right down the street. We wound up getting tickets and going to a game at 'The Big House.'

"I just fell in love with football after that. From there, football was my goal, to play in college and make a way for my family."

It wasn't easy, though. The dream, like everything in Maulet's early life, was nothing but a challenge.

"I wound up moving back to New Orleans," said Maulet. "I was doing so much. Doing the wrong things. Not going to school. Being on the streets. Not doing what I was supposed to. So, my grandpa sent me to New Orleans for a little bit to live with my aunt. Still doing the wrong things. Still not doing what I needed to do."

It was when he moved back to New Orleans things finally took a turn for the better. Maulet went to Bonnabel High School in New Orleans, and during his junior year he played football, the first time he ever played the sport. It was because of a man named Donald Cox, who at the time was the defensive backs coach at the school and saw what type of athlete Maulet was. Cox took him under his wing by allowing him to stay at his home and be a part of his family.

Maulet enjoyed every moment playing football his junior year, but it was fleeting for him. His senior year he had already turned 19 years old, and under the district rules, he couldn't play high school football any longer.

"Katrina had happened, which set me back, so I was too old to play my senior year," said Maulet. "I didn't know what to do. I was pretty good. Didn't know what to do. Was lost again."

That is when Cox's influence truly came into play.

"He came up to me and told me we are going to get you in the GED program," said Maulet. "You're going to get your GED and then you're going to walk-on to a junior college. Me, I didn't know the significance of it but I kind of trusted him. Going through what I went through, I can read the difference between BS and a kind heart. It was coming from the heart. He didn't want anything from me. I decided I'm going to do what I have to do to help my family and yours as well.

"And it paid off. Six months working my butt off in a 24-hour fitness gym. Going to the field, going to high school practices and watching people play, and I can't play my senior year. That gave me motivation to keep working. I ended up getting my GED."

That was just the beginning. Maulet enrolled at Copiah-Lincoln Community College in Mississippi and went out for the football team as a walk-on. He ended up with five interceptions and 20 passes defensed during his sophomore year. It was then he thought football might be his future.

"It just woke me up," said Maulet. "I thought, 'I have a shot.'"

He transferred to the University of Memphis following his sophomore season, where he started 21 of the 26 games in which he played and finished with 111 tackles, 22 passes defensed, 4.5 sacks, four interceptions, two forced fumbles, and a fumble recovery.

Maulet's dream of making a career out of football took off when he was signed by the New Orleans Saints as an undrafted rookie following the 2017 NFL Draft. He bounced around some, spent the 2018 season with the Saints and the Indianapolis Colts, before signing with the New York Jets in 2019. He started 11 of the 23 games he played in during his two seasons with the Jets.

Maulet signed a one-year contract with the Steelers during the 2021 offseason, and this past offseason was re-signed to a two-year contract, which gave him some of the stability he had been searching for.

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It also was the next step in a sport that saved Maulet from a life that could be much different today.

"Growing up in the Lower Ninth Ward gave me the ability to look onto the next thing in life, just knowing that it can always be worse," said Maulet. "Just knowing the opportunities I have right now in my life are such a blessing because of what I have been through.

"A lot of people look at football as a game and they are grateful for it. It did save me. I don't know anything else. You hear my story now. I never had a regular job. Never worked for anyone. This is all I know. That's why I take it so seriously. I am so grateful for it, and I approach every day like it's my last because without this I have nothing.

"It's one of those things where I get nervous sometimes thinking about how many years I have left, because what do I want to do after this. It's a scary feeling for me because I didn't do anything else.

"That's why I have the same mindset now that I had growing up. Being the oldest of five. Not having much. I still have the same mindset. I'm very frugal. I don't need jewelry. I don't need a fancy car. I don't need an eight-bedroom house. Me and my brothers and sisters grew up in a one-bedroom house, because the living room was the second bedroom. Just being close-knit, having a small house, being family oriented with my brothers and sisters, it was like, shoot, I'm going to save as much money as I can because it has to last a lifetime not only for my family, but my future family.

"I'm smart about things because I know what it's like." ✦

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Trubisky, run defense power win vs. Panthers

BY **BOB LABRIOLA**
Editor

If Mitch Trubisky had played like this at the beginning of the regular season, he would still be the starting quarterback. And if the Steelers had played like this on Dec. 11 against the Ravens at Acrisure Stadium, they would still be in the thick of the playoff race. But as the saying goes every year at this time: "If ifs and buts were candy and nuts, everyone would have a Merry Christmas."

With the wouldas and couldas out of the way, a quick return to reality shows the Steelers are now 6-8 following their 24-16 victory over Carolina on Dec. 18 at Bank of America Stadium, a win that had Trubisky's fingerprints all over it, a win that was keyed by a run defense that allowed 21 yards on 16 attempts to an opponent that had rushed for 223, 185, and 232 yards in three of its previous four games, a win where the Steelers were the foot doing the kicking one week after being the butt being kicked in a loss to the Ravens.

"Hard fought game," said Coach Mike Tomlin. "I thought we played an attrition game today. We wanted to win the line of scrimmage on both sides, and I thought we were effective in doing so. I thought we ran it on offense and played behind our running game. I thought we did a good job of minimizing their running game on defense, and obviously it's big because we've been leaking there the last six quarters or so defensively in that area."

It was Tomlin's 160th career win and it came in his 255th game to make him the fifth-fastest coach in NFL history to reach that plateau, behind Don Shula in 219 games; George Halas in 236; Curly Lambeau in 243; and Bill Belichick in 254.

A potential sidebar to this slice of NFL history is that this historic win was achieved with a backup quarterback, and that the week of practice leading up to the game was exactly what that backup quarterback needed.

Trubisky emerged from the offseason, training camp, and the preseason as the starting quarterback for the regular season opener on Sept. 11, but despite having a resume that included a winning record as an NFL starter in Chicago, two separate playoff appearances as the Bears starting quarterback, and a Pro Bowl appearance, he was tentative in the pocket, hesitant to pull the trigger even though he was sufficiently experienced to have an understanding of what "open" in the NFL looked like.

That served as the basis for Tomlin's move to rookie Kenny Pickett at halftime of the season's fourth game – vs. the New York Jets on Oct. 2 – and since then Trubisky had made just two appearances. In those, he had played well in relief of an injured Pickett in an Oct. 16 win over Tampa Bay, and then he threw three costly interceptions in a 2-point loss to the Ravens on Dec. 11. Unsure of Pickett's availability because of the franchise's relationship with its neighbors at the UPMC Concussion Clinic and a by-the-book adherence to the league's protocol, Tomlin needed a way to choose between one guy who had just turned the ball over three times and another who had to be coated in rust because he hadn't taken a meaningful snap since August.

The practice reps were divided between Trubisky and Rudolph, and by the time the week's on-field work had concluded Tomlin had made a decision but was covering himself with a backup plan just in case. Trubisky got the start, but Rudolph also got some work to give him a chance to succeed if Trubisky didn't.

"It's really cut and dry," said Tomlin when asked what he wanted to see from the quarterbacks in the days leading up to the game in Charlotte. "I wanted to see Mitch's ability to bounce back from the last performance relative to taking care of the ball, and he displayed that. And I wanted to give Mason an opportunity to get some live varsity offensive reps, which he hadn't had a lot of opportunities to do in this regular season. To check his level of rust, his ability to anticipate, his timing with those guys in seemingly

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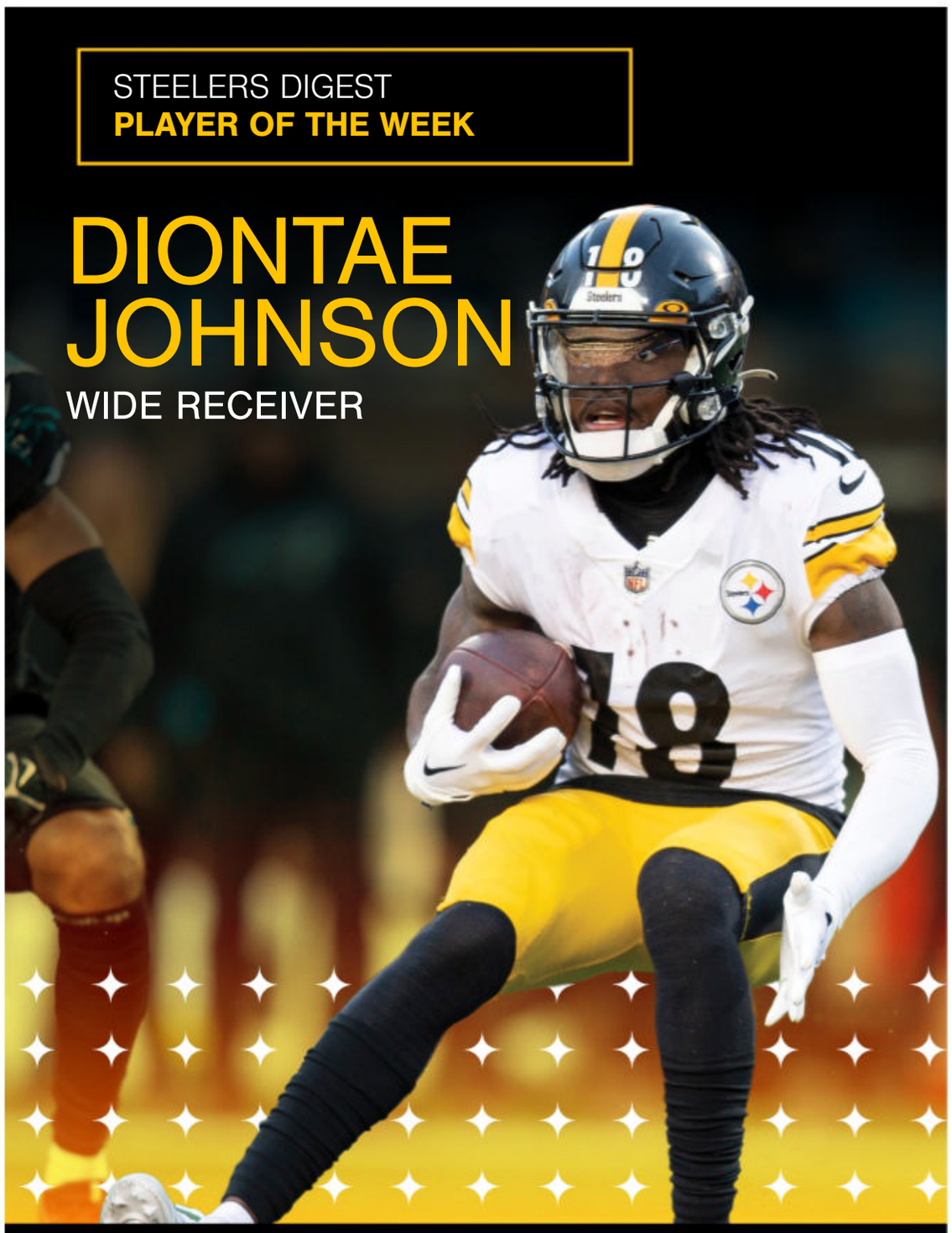

It was the kind of performance a team expects from its No. 1 wide receiver. It was the kind of performance the Steelers have been hoping to get from Diontae Johnson on a regular basis.

Johnson finished with 10 catches for 98 yards to lead all receivers in both categories, but there was a sub-text to those statistics that combined to make his performance even more special. Johnson was targeted 10 times and made 10 catches, which means he had a perfect catch percentage of 100. Those 10 catches were good for 7 first downs, and five of those seven came on third-down situations in a game where the Steelers converted 12-of-16 (75 percent) on third downs. Johnson is the Steelers Digest Player of the Week.

Also considered were Mitch Trubisky, who started in place of the injured Kenny Pickett and completed 17-of-22 (77.3 percent) for 179 yards, with no touchdowns, no interceptions, and a rating of 100.4, while also gaining 10 yards on five quarterback sneaks with 1 touchdown; Larry Ogunjobi, who had 5 tackles, including 2 for loss on running plays, an area where the Panthers were limited to 21 yards on 16 attempts (1.3 average); Najee Harris, who rushed for 86 yards on 24 carries with a 7-yard touchdown run that opened the scoring; Cam Heyward, who had 3 tackles and 1.5 sacks; and Alex Highsmith, who had 4 tackles, 1 sack, and a forced fumble. ✦

Digest Photo/KARL ROSER

live action. I wanted to get a feel for all of that, and he did a good job in that regard."

Then the plan was to turn it over to the guys in the trenches, and each front made a statement early. The Panthers managed 6 yards rushing on their first 9 attempts, and when the Steelers drove 67 yards in 12 plays on their first possession to take a 7-0 lead, 8 of the 12 plays were runs, and cornerback Keith Taylor Jr. opted not to engage Najee Harris close to the goal line on the 7-yard touchdown. The proper tone had been set, and from that point it was only a couple of knucklehead penalties that threatened the Steelers' control throughout the game.

The Steelers played with a physical purpose throughout – as Tomlin phrased it, "we played an attrition game today" – and it showed up both in the offense electing to run quarterback sneaks on several short-yardage possession downs, and in the Panthers giving up hope of establishing a competent running attack. The Panthers ran it or attempted to run it 16 times and netted 21 yards, which made the Carolina offense totally one-dimensional but not to its advantage.

"I'm appreciative of the efforts," said Tomlin. "Obviously, we could have played smarter in some instances. Penalties are not how we choose to live, particularly some of the 15-yard variety, so hopefully there are opportunities to learn from that. It's good to learn with a 'W'."

The 15-yard penalties being referenced were on Diontae Johnson and then Marcus Allen, both in the third quarter. Johnson stood over a Carolina defensive back after converting a third-and-7 with an 8-yard catch for a first down at the Carolina 7-yard line and thus was flagged for unsportsmanlike conduct that moved the offense back to the 22-yard line. Allen was shown by TV cameras in a couple of verbal altercations close to the Carolina sideline, and his unsportsmanlike conduct penalty nullified the impact of back-to-back sacks (Alex Highsmith and then Cam Heyward) that were about to lead to a Carolina punt and instead presented Carolina with a first-and-10 at the Steelers 34-yard line.

Cameras caught Tomlin having an animated one-way conversation with Johnson as the offense gathered at the 22-yard line after which he took advantage of an opportunity to redeem himself and contributed a 9-yard catch to set up a third-and-1, which 4 running plays later became a sneak by Trubisky for a touchdown and a 21-7 lead.

About Allen's penalty, Tomlin said, "I don't know. It was in a dead period. We were making adjustments on the sideline and so I didn't have eyes on it. I don't know if any of us had eyes on it."

Maybe none of the coaches, but Cam Heyward has a knack for being on top of these kinds of things. And since Heyward had seen the impact of his sack nullified and then got to play an extra half-dozen snaps because Carolina had been gifted a fresh set of downs, this could fall under his purview, and then it would be unwise for Allen to ignore any advice that might come his way.

Anyway, the Steelers ended the day's work by doing what was necessary to win a game, and you could pick one of several different statistical categories to tell the story of why that happened as well as why it was a slog. But it's also fair to recognize this particular group as still being in a stage of development where every victory is hard-earned.

"Feels great," said Trubisky, who wasn't perfect but was flawless. "The only thing I cared about today was winning. Staying on the field, converting those third downs and helping this team win. It was an emphasis all week. I know I could protect the football, and that's what I did today. I'm just proud of all the other guys for sticking together, believing in me, letting me lead us today and coming away with the victory. It definitely feels good. It's awesome."

It's also a reminder of what they could have been, while at the same time hinting at what they might become. ✦

Digest Photo/KARL ROSER

Turnovers again decide Steelers-Ravens outcome

BY **BOB LABRIOLA**
Editor

There are a lot of statistics and anecdotes and trends that can be used to characterize Steelers vs. Ravens, or used to characterize the sub-set of the overall rivalry by limiting it to Mike Tomlin vs. John Harbaugh. But there is one theme that overrides all others.

Despite the records of the teams, the significance to each team, the venue, the spot on the schedule, the weather, or some combination of those, the final score will be close.

During the Tomlin vs. Harbaugh era of Steelers-Ravens, 24 of the 31 meetings have ended with the margin of victory, or the margin of defeat, being eight points or fewer. In other words, a one-score game. The 32nd would be no different.

When games are consistently this close, turnovers play an outsized role in the outcome, and while "turnovers are bad" hardly qualifies as cutting-edge next-gen analysis, sometimes it's that simple. The Steelers lost to the Ravens, 16-14, on Dec. 11 at Acrisure Stadium, and the outcome was determined by four turnovers – three interceptions and a blocked field goal that earns a special designation as a turnover in this instance because it resulted from a mistake every bit as egregious as throwing late into coverage in the middle of the field. Which Mitch Trubisky did twice.

The loss dropped the Steelers to 5-8 and snapped their two-game winning streak, while the victory enabled the Ravens to keep pace with the Bengals atop the AFC North Division and also snapped their personal four-game losing streak in this series. The outcome also threw cold water on the issue of the Steelers working themselves back to relevance when it came to the seven-team playoff picture in the AFC.

There were many other components to this particular 60-minute installment of Steelers-Ravens, either statistical or anecdotal, that might take one's eye off the ball, so to speak, but all of those are rendered moot to the outcome by the turnovers.

Before the ball was put on the tee, it seemed natural to view what was about to happen through the prism of the respective team's starting quarterbacks. For the Steelers, it would be Kenny Pickett, a rookie making his first appearance vs. the Ravens, and Baltimore would counter with Tyler Huntley, a so-far career backup about to make his fifth regular season start, with one of the previous four being a 16-for-31 for 141 yards, with no touchdowns, 2 interceptions, and a rating of 37.2 performance in a 16-13 loss to the Steelers in the 2021 season finale.

But that storyline didn't even make it out of the first quarter, because Pickett ended up in the concussion protocol following a scramble during which linebacker Roquan Smith spun him to the ground with the help of a hand in his facemask and ended with Pickett's head bouncing off the Acrisure Stadium sod. That the play went unflagged seemed curious initially and then became part of a confusing pattern, based on referee Adrian Hill's crew later awarding Baltimore possession of a fumble via the football version of baseball's ties-go-to-the-runner philosophy after it was decided that one player from each team had "two hands on the football;" which then was one-upped by a call of offsetting pass interference penalties on Marlon Humphrey and Diontae Johnson. How can pass interference be offsetting?

Anyway, not all that long after Pickett was out of the game because he was in the protocol, Huntley's ninth rushing attempt of the game ended with Minkah Fitzpatrick treating him like the runner he became when he pulled the ball from J.K. Dobbins' belly, tucked it under his arm and turned upfield.

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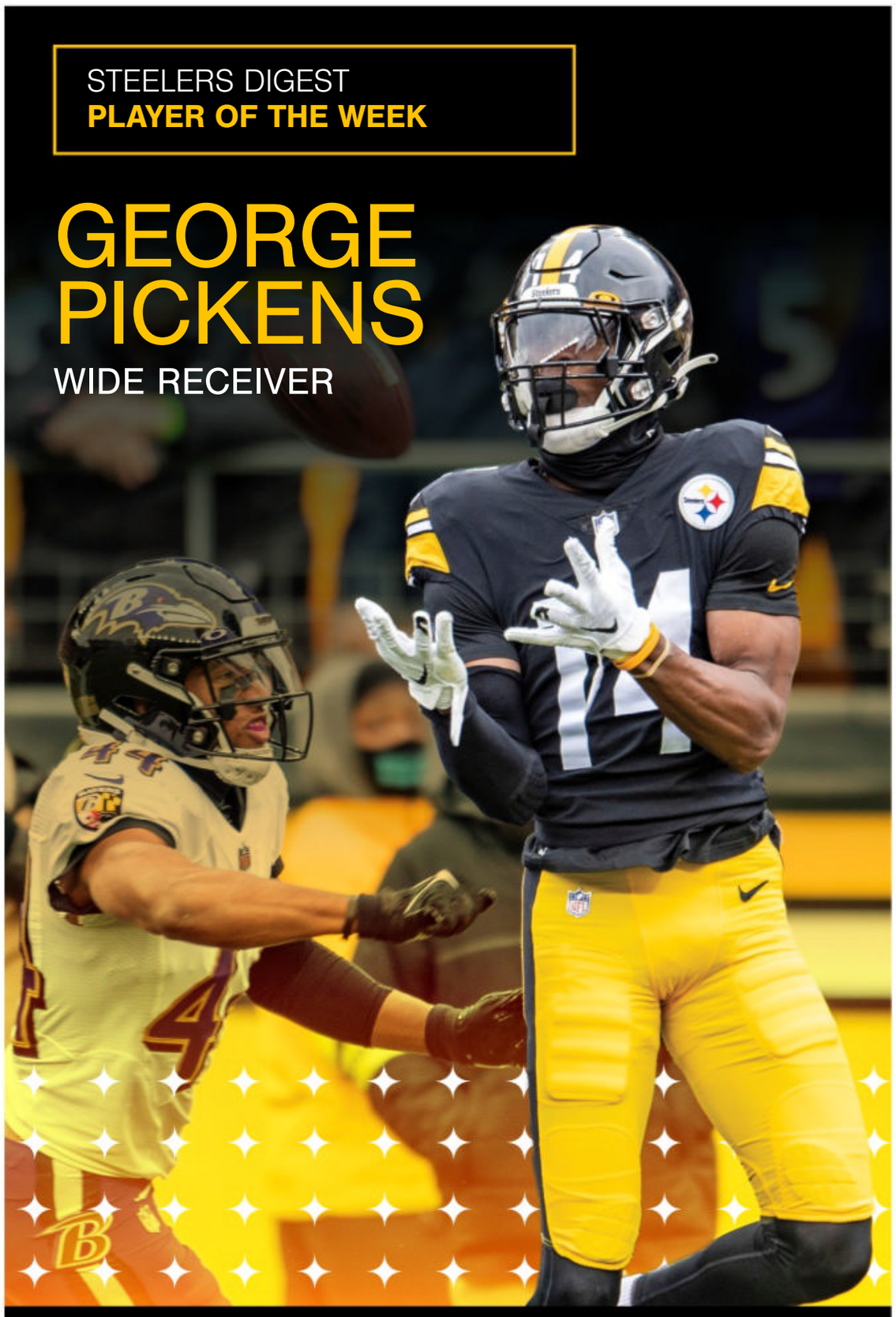

There are a couple of ways to use hindsight to try to make some sense of the Steelers 16-14 loss to the Ravens on Dec. 11 at Acrisure Stadium. One is that they needed more plays to be made by the offense, and another is they needed fewer critical mistakes to be made. Period. Either way, the result was a loss that dropped the Steelers' record to 5-8.

George Pickens was targeted four times, and he made three catches for 78 yards, with the fourth resulting in a pass interference penalty on Marlon Humphrey in the end zone that put the ball at the Baltimore 1-yard line and set up Najee Harris' leap over the top for a touchdown. Pickens' catches went for 42 yards, 25 yards, and 11 yards. He is the Steelers Digest Player of the Week.

Also considered were Chris Wormley, who had 3 tackles, shared a sack with Tyson Alualu, and forced a fumble before leaving the game with a knee injury; Minkah Fitzpatrick, who was in on a team-leading 11 tackles, with 6 solos; and Terrell Edmunds, who was in on 9 tackles, including 3 solos. ✦

Digest Photo/ABIGAIL DEAN

Huntley soon would join Pickett in the protocol after being checked in the visitor's locker room, which meant Anthony Brown became the Ravens quarterback.

Trubisky came off the sideline with a hot hand and moved the Steelers 64 yards in 5 plays for a touchdown by doing what he seemed reluctant to do when he opened the season as the starter – push the ball down the field to his playmaking receivers. On his third play – a third-and-9 from the Pittsburgh 37-yard line, Trubisky delivered a 14-yard completion to Pat Freiermuth, and followed that with a deep shot that George Pickens went up and caught for a 42-yard gain to the Ravens 7-yard line. On the very next play, Trubisky went right back to Pickens in the end zone, which drew a pass interference penalty on Humphrey. Najee Harris vaulted over the pile for the 1-yard touchdown, and the Steelers offense looked like it was poised to break out.

But that ended up being the highlight, and things descended into a parade of, as Vince Lombardi famously was caught by NFL Films yelling at his team from the sideline, "What the hell is going on out there?" Pickens caught two passes for 67 yards and drew a pass interference penalty in the end zone on one of the league's top cornerbacks in the first half, and then was targeted only once in the second. Harris had 11 touches for 39 yards and a touchdown in the first half, which is not great but not an atypical start against a Ravens' defense, but he disappeared in the second half with three touches for 11 yards, one of which was a quick pass he turned into a 10-yard gain. And the Ravens' 6-point halftime lead didn't even grow to 9 until midway through the fourth quarter and then quickly was shaved to 2.

There was a span between Harris' touchdown that made it Ravens 10, Steelers 7 and Chris Boswell's 40-yard field goal attempt that was blocked where the offense put together possessions of 47 yards in 9 plays, 52 yards in 5 plays, 27 yards in 6 plays, 43 yards in 7 plays, and 46 yards in 9 plays. Those possessions ended: red zone interception, red zone interception, punt, interception at the Ravens' 1-yard line, and a blocked kick because nobody on the field goal unit paid any special attention to Calais Campbell, who was the one guy in the purple pants on the field at the time who required special attention.

During those 30-plus minutes of game time, the Steelers had done the Ravens' job for them. They possessed the ball and burned clock but failed to change their side of the scoreboard. That allowed Baltimore to get away with starting Huntley and then go to Brown to continue to hand the ball to J.K. Dobbins and burn more clock without having to worry about actually scoring any points.

"You just can't turn the ball over, particularly in the nature of this matchup," said Tomlin after a one-score outcome for the 25th time in the last 32 installments. "Usually, the team that turns the ball over in the red area is the team that loses. They've turned it over some in the red area in recent matchups and we've won those games. We turned it over in the red area in this one, so we lost this one."

There were contributing factors, such as Baltimore rushing for 215 yards with a 5.1 average even while employing personnel that was largely ineffective otherwise. But because the Ravens' grand total was one touchdown and three field goals, that "defense" was good enough to win with had the offense not turned it over three times and if the field goal unit had applied what it had been told all week.

"You know the turnovers in this series have kind of been the thing," said Harbaugh. "To get the three interceptions after they had driven down there speaks volumes ... Those were great interceptions by (Patrick Queen) and Roquan [Smith]. Then, Marcus [Williams] going and covering the ground that he did to make that play (at the 1-yard line) shows you what he's capable of. Those were game-winning plays right there for sure."

Or from the opposite sideline, game-losing plays for sure. ✦

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